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TAGS: SOCI PHUM CU

SUBJECT: CUBA: INNOVATIVE PUBLICATION SHUTTING DOWN, AT LEAST FOR NOW

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (U) As has been reported widely in the media, the Church-sponsored independent magazine called "Vitral" (stained glass), launched in 1999, is now shutting down. Its editor, Dagoberto Valdes, who had obtained permission and material support from the Bishop of Pinar del Rio to run the magazine, now has lost that support in the wake of Bishop Jose Siro Rodriguez's retirement. Valdes's public line is: "We ran out of ink and paper."

¶2. (C) Dagoberto Valdes has been unable to travel to Havana in the past few weeks, but confirmed to us the closure of Vitral via e-mail. Bishop Siro, on April 11, told COM and Pol-Econ Counselor that Vitral was a constant challenge to publish--because of political pressure against its free-thinking format, and logistical problems obtaining printing supplies. Siro said that at one point he purchased four photocopiers from an ETA representative who had taken refuge in Cuba. (Comment: Strange bedfellows, but business is business. End Comment). The printing and circulation of some 10,000 copies every other month was run right out of the Bishopric. Siro said he was not surprised his successor, Bishop Jorge Enrique Serpa, was pulling the plug on Vitral: "It was a headache and a constant source of political problems; he could not be under any obligation to take all that on." COM suggested to Siro that certain international Catholic charities might be willing to donate money to keep Vitral in print; Siro welcomed the impulse but said the idea was not workable. He added that Serpa's approach is to avoid friction ("roces") with the regime.

¶3. (C) The degree of regime involvement in the Vitral difficulties can only be imagined, but is not hard to detect.

Father Rodolfo Loic, parish priest in Havana and previously secretary to Cardinal Ortega, spoke to us at length on 10

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April about who he saw behind the Vitral problem. While he cast doubt on the degree of Vatican support for Vitral, he reserved his main barbs for the regime here. "Vitral is only the most visible part of the problem," Father Rodolfo explained. The regime, increasingly nervous about popular sentiment in the current is-it-Fidel-or-Raul-in-charge, phase, is trying to control all publications. Caridad Diego, Central Committee Secretary for Religious Affairs, has other Church publications in her sights beyond just Vitral, Loic said. He specifically mentioned "Palabra Nueva," a monthly journal of the Havana Archdiocese, which he said had come in for scrutiny for publishing three mildly independent pieces in the last several months, and "Vida Cristiana," a weekly publication distributed in Catholic Masses across the island

every Sunday. The latter, which is put out by the Jesuit Center in Havana, contains mainly spiritual lessons and readings, but often with a clear critique at the nefarious effects of totalitarianism. Its editor, Father Alberto Garcia Sanchez, told us several months ago that he is aware the regime monitors closely what he publishes, but had been careful about showing too heavy a hand in censoring his work.

¶4. (C) Comment: Bishop Siro, whose views are in line with Cuba's democratic opposition, provided solid Church cover for Vitral, a necessary condition for its survival. His successor represents a more common, pedestrian Church position in Cuba. Although it is conceivable that Valdes may continue to circulate Vitral-esque articles electronically, the printed version was much more important, as it was passed around to the large majority of Cubans (a larger majority than Haitians) who have no internet access. We will follow up with Valdes himself when he is next in Havana.

PARMLY